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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides advice on how schools can forge useful working relationships with the news media. Nineteen ground rules for working with print or broadcast media are outlined. The most important rule for all occasions is to make sure that your information is true. Strategies are described for using various tools of the trade, such as the phone call, news release, media advisory, fact sheet, news conference, individual briefings, the op-ed piece, editorial board visits, letters to the editor, public service announcements, and appearances on radio and television. Sidebars present tips for TV interviews, protocol in the electronic age, media kits, media access to the school, rapport with reporters, credibility do's and don'ts, and effective wording of media responses. Appendices contain definitions of media jargon and samples of a news release, media advisory, and fact sheet. (LMI)

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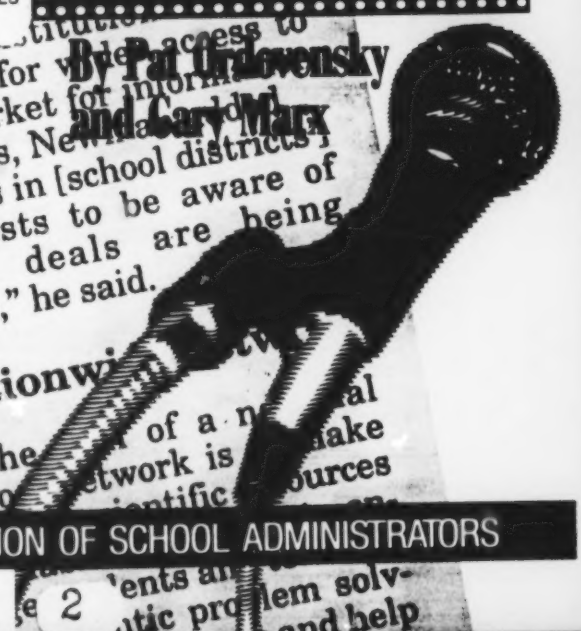
Working with the NEWS MEDIA

By Pat Urbanovsky and Gary Marx



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The Media: Part of Your Life

When you decided to get involved in education, you also committed yourself to working with the news media.

The media are a part of each educator's professional life for several reasons. Here are just two:

- People want to know how well schools are teaching students.
- People want to know how their tax dollars are being invested.

In short, our schools deal with two things very dear to people, their children and their tax dollars.

Attitudes and the media. At any moment, groups of people are sharing a break, visiting at a supermarket checkout, or gathering at a social event. One of their most common topics of conversation is our schools.

Attitudes are formed primarily because of the experiences people have with an institution. In many communities, however, fewer than 25 percent of homes have students in our schools. For the other 75 percent, the news media might just be a very important source of information. . .and attitudes.

Because citizens rely so heavily on the news media to get the "real" story, it is important to express your district's view clearly. As educators, we have the responsibility of ensuring attitudes toward schools are not based on misinformation or misunderstanding—another reason for regularly sharing facts, ideas, and opinions with the media.

Part of an overall communications program

Encounters with the media vary widely in type, scope, and purpose. They range from a full-scale news conference to a brief chat on the phone. Educators promoting a story might initiate a media contact, or reporters might ask a superintendent or principal to comment on a certain issue.

Yet, working effectively with the news media is only one part of a sound communications plan. Each school system, building, and classroom, in fact, should have its own communications plan, laying out activities and channels for involving, informing, and listening to those it serves.

This booklet, cowritten by a longtime education reporter and a veteran school administrator, provides advice on how schools can forge useful working relationships with the news media.

What Is News?

News is the unusual. It's an answer to the question, "What's new?" News also might be defined as whatever the editor or news director decides it will be. One thing is certain: when anything unusual happens, people in the community expect their local news media to let them know what's going on.

Much of what schools have to communicate is not news, but interesting information. That's another reason why school systems need their own channels for communication. There is simply much more to communicate than the independent news media can handle.

A mutual need. Two times when educators must work with the media are: when the media want something from them and, conversely, when educators want something from the media.

When crisis strikes, school officials, if possible, should report it first. In doing so, they establish themselves as primary sources of information and make it clear from the beginning that news is not being withheld. However, a rule of crisis communication is to report only fact, not rumor.

The crisis

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

- A pressure group demands that curriculum materials be censored.
- A boiler explodes in a school facility.
- Violence erupts at a school, and people are injured.

Educators call these situations crises; the media call them news. Each of these events, and many like them, are unusual and will gain immediate attention from the news media.

A responsible news report requires that all sides of a story be presented. For this reason, reporters will seek comments with a sense of urgency for the next morning's paper or for an instantaneous radio or television broadcast. Educators will have little time to prepare a position statement or massage it into the best words.

Regular coverage of the school beat

Good reporters, depending on how intensely they cover their beat or area of responsibility, will often initiate a story. They're not responding to a crisis or trying to create one, they're simply reporting on some aspect of the schools to enlighten their readers, for example:

• Stories of school innovation or reform appear nationally, and the reporter wants to present a local perspective.

• Test scores are about to be announced.

• An attempt is made to report on trends or issues such as site-based management, computer-assisted instruction, security measures to protect students, or the use of readiness tests.

The media aren't shy about letting educators know when they want information. As public servants and as "news sources," educators need to be ready to respond openly, honestly, and factually.

Educators are counselors to the news media, helping them find information and perspective. If administrators, board members, teachers, and others are prepared to deal with media requests, the experience can be mutually beneficial. If they aren't, then both groups may be headed for a rocky road.

Opportunity knocks. Learn to see questions from the news media as opportunities to provide answers and insights. If you don't provide this information, other sources outside the schools will—and their message could be incomplete, skewed, or even wrong.

"Effective principals recognize that problems are inevitable and talk openly about them. In fact, many effective principals initiate these discussions and are willing to share their ideas about how problems originated and what is being done to correct them."

—Principals for Our Changing Schools
National Policy Board for Educational Administration

When Do Educators Need the News Media?

Educators rely on the news media to pass along a variety of information to the public, for instance:

• A bond or other type of finance election is planned. You want people to understand what it includes and what it will cost.

• A task force has been appointed to consider upgrading the reading program.

• New bus schedules have been set or concert dates established for local high school music groups.

In these and many other cases, school systems would like to have the news media cover the story, make an announcement, or run a list or schedule.

Covering the bases. As important as coverage of an education story may seem, it still may not make the paper or the airwaves. In other cases, it may make the paper but not in the way you preferred. For example, an article on an upcoming bond election may balance the school's perspective with comments from citizens opposed to a tax increase.

Nonetheless, schools and school systems should continue to share regular information with the news media, always with the attitude that the media ultimately will decide what is news. In the meantime, educators also should use other channels—community appearances, newsletters, staff meetings—to communicate their messages.

When sharing story ideas through news releases, phone calls, or other means, don't try to convince reporters that your schools are perfect. No institution is perfect. Be honest about what's working well and what you're trying to make work even better. When you think about it, why would people want to support additional finances if everything seems to be running smoothly? Additional resources generally grow when schools show a need or an opportunity to improve.

The Media's Perspective

How can a school administrator help reporters cover education stories?

"The key advice I have is to be as candid and honest as possible, even when it may be uncomfortable," says Bob Frahm, a reporter for the *Hartford Courant*, who has covered education for 22 years. In turn, "most reasonable newspapers will treat a story with fairness," he adds.

According to Frahm, the worst thing an educator can do is act as a "gatekeeper." An unproductive, adversarial relationship develops when schools try to prevent reporters from getting information.

Frahm views his—and the media's—role in education as explanatory; one that provides the public with an accurate picture of what's going on in the schools.

"Readers have a strong investment in schools," through their children, community involvement, and tax dollars, he explains. "If a school doesn't want the press to talk about anything but a field trip to the zoo, that's doing everyone a disservice," says Frahm.

However, Frahm is critical of media coverage that falls back on "the old stereotype that our schools are going down the tubes. . .that our schools can't compare with Japan or Germany."

"That's a gross simplification. . .The truth is much more complicated. The media has a responsibility to tell a story in its complexity, to explain as much as it can," he says.

Frahm regularly covers stories on school desegregation, financial concerns, urban school issues, curriculum developments, and continuous school reform. For all of these topics, he turns to the schools for information.

"I tell administrators to look at the larger school picture and ask themselves, 'Is my school representative of a statewide or national trend?'" Frahm says. "Don't forget the media is out there and interested. We're always looking for specific examples."

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Building Strong Media Relations

If a crisis erupts, would you feel more comfortable explaining your situation to someone you know on a first-name basis or to a reporter you've never met?

Would you rather send a news release to someone you don't know or pick up the phone and say, "Hi Susan, I have something you might find interesting?"

Most people tend to work better and more comfortably with people they know, and reporters and educators are no exception. Instinctively, people believe words coming from a trusted friend or acquaintance.

If a trusting relationship has been established between a reporter and a source:

- Both are better served when the inevitable crisis occurs.
- Reporters are more inclined to listen to a story idea or look closely at a news release.
- Reporters will turn to people they can rely on when they need answers to questions, insights into a story, or counsel on who knows most about the issue at hand.

Getting acquainted

Introduce yourself to local reporters who frequently cover education. For school communications administrators, that may mean getting together for an informal visit during times when neither of you has a specific request or agenda. Other administrators and teachers may simply want to greet reporters when they come to call.

Establishing Reporter Rapport

- If appropriate, make regular phone calls or personal visits to apprise the reporter of school activities he or she might find interesting.
- Return reporters' phone calls promptly.
- If a reporter asks about a school activity, provide an answer as soon as possible.
- If someone else in the school system is well equipped to answer a question, have that person call the reporter promptly.
- Don't hedge an answer or further confuse an issue with jargon or fancy words. Whatever you say, be sure it's true.

When visiting informally with a reporter, perhaps over coffee:

- Talk about how you can help each other do an even better job.
- Learn about the reporter's deadlines and space or time limitations.
- Inquire about stories reporters are considering and talk about how you might contribute.
- Build a rapport so that next time you visit, the reporter will remember you as a person, not just as a name. When the seeds of trust are planted and nourished in every encounter, the harvest will be worth the effort.

Don't jeopardize credibility

Credibility is built over time. Once you have it, the road to good media relations is headed in the right direction. However, the credibility you've worked so hard to establish can be destroyed in an instant—sometimes permanently.

How is credibility destroyed?

- Not telling the truth.
- Obscuring the facts.
- Giving one reporter or news medium an advantage over another.
- Letting your ego show through.
- Reacting angrily or defensively to honest questions.
- Making constant complaints about "negative news."
- Not having a broad range of information and insights.

Working With the Media: The Ground Rules

Here are several all-purpose tips for working with print or broadcast media.

1. **RULE NUMBER ONE FOR ALL OCCASIONS: Whatever you say, be sure it's true.**

Don't even think about obscuring the facts or saying things that are untrue. Inevitably, such an approach damages credibility. If you're making an educated guess, say so. Call it an estimate or speculation, but unless you're sure, don't present it as fact.

2. **Know your audience and address it.**

You might organize your presentation a bit differently for a PTA meeting, a Chamber of Commerce luncheon, or a school assembly. By the same token, educators need to consider the audience they're addressing when responding to reporters' questions.

Credibility Do's and Don'ts

When a reporter calls....
- Do: Return the call promptly.
- Don't: Ignore the message.

When a reporter asks a question....
- Do: Respond directly in clear, simple terms.
- Don't: Hedge the question with devious answers or use educational jargon.

If you don't know an answer....
- Do: Say you don't know but will try to find out, then offer to have someone who knows call the reporter.
- Don't: Try to make up something that might be accurate.

If you would rather not answer....
- Do: Say you would rather not answer, and why.
- Don't: Say "no comment."

If you have news to release....
- Do: Distribute it simultaneously to all media.
- Don't: Play favorites.

If a reporter makes a mistake....
- Do: Talk to the reporter to see how it can be resolved.
- Don't: Go over the reporter's head to complain.

If you're addressing a controversial issue, generally 15 percent of the people will agree with you, 15 percent will disagree, and 70 percent will be undecided. Too often, educators spend valuable airtime addressing the 15 percent who disagree. It is usually best to speak thoughtfully to the undecided.

If time permits, try to brief the reporter covering a story on its background, what you consider the most crucial issues, and what you think people in the community need to know. If the reporter is new to the beat, it is a real service to quickly review even the most basic details to help put the story into context.

3. **Remember that brevity is a virtue.**

Since reporters are generally limited either by time or space, compose your comments in easy to understand, colorful segments. Rather than rambling on about a subject, you might say, "There are two main concerns." Then name them. Numbering the points will make them more memorable. If the reporter has follow-up questions, he or she will ask them.

In short, make your point, adding any necessary background information. Beware of the temptation to make the same points over and over again. Your eloquence may be lost in a sea of words.

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4. Avoid education jargon.

Jargon exists in every field. It's a kind of shorthand that people use to communicate within a profession or line of work.

However, some education terms make better doors than windows. While a discussion of "criterion-referenced testing" might hit its mark at a staff meeting, it may require some explanation if your audience is unfamiliar with the term. If your audience isn't likely to understand a term, either don't use it or offer a brief, uncomplicated explanation.

5. Stick to the story.

If a reporter is visiting with you about a bond issue, site-based management, or test scores in math, avoid drifting into other subjects.

Often, reporters have limited time and face tight deadlines. Their preparation may range from composing a few questions on the way to your school or office to spending a full day or more doing library research. Both your time and theirs is valuable, so try to stick to the subject.

Once the interview is complete, it's always possible to courteously suggest another story, such as, "There's another good story here on how we work with students who have learning disabilities. If you're interested, give me a call. I'd like to visit with you about it."

Of course, the street runs two ways. If a reporter introduces a new subject and you don't feel adequately prepared, say, "Let me look into that and call you." Then, be sure to call or make an appointment. Don't delay.

6. Don't blame reporters for things they can't control.

A reporter is a representative of a news organization. He or she may report to various editors, producers, news directors, and others who edit the information before it appears in print or on the air.

In most newsrooms, a reporter's decisions will usually determine the focus of the story, the elements it will contain, and how those elements will be presented in relation to each other.

A reporter generally has little or no control over:

- Whether the story actually will be used.
- How the story is positioned and presented in relation to other stories of the day.
- The length of a story, either in print space or air time.
- What is cut from the story to make it fit the required time and space.
- The story's headline.

When a newspaper goes into production, a story that was originally written to fill half a page might be condensed to a quarter of a page, depending on space

factors and competition for that space. Educators should be assured that reporters are equally frustrated when information you both considered important doesn't make it into print or on the air.

7. Know what is public information.

Public schools are public institutions, no different from the local mayor's office or the U.S. Congress.

Therefore, reports and surveys financed using public dollars are public documents. A reporter can legitimately ask to see any such reports, and schools are required to provide them. Resisting these requests is a quick way to produce negative stories.

On the other hand, releasing these reports, including test scores, complete with a school system analysis, can help reporters put information into perspective.

School board sessions also are public meetings, unless closed sessions are authorized for discussion of personnel, land acquisition, or related issues. Keep in mind that if too many executive sessions are held, reporters and the community begin to wonder what's happening in secret, behind closed doors.

Anything said at a public meeting, by any participant, can be publicly reported.

8. Give one person full responsibility for media relations.

Each school and school system should identify one person who will be a media liaison. Often, that person is the director of communications or public relations. While others will play important roles in working with reporters, this person generally will be the first contact for reporters. The communications director also will initiate contact with reporters and establish the rapport described earlier as essential to effective media relations.

The media relations director for the school system should:

- Work directly with the superintendent.
- Hold a position on the school system's cabinet and be involved in and informed about the details of all programs and important decisions.
- Have the authority to speak for the school system on any issue that might arise and to call on others for their knowledge and expertise in addressing various topics.
- Not be chastised for reporting facts. (Too often, organizations are prone to shoot messengers rather than solve problems.)

When relations with the media are assigned to people who have little information or are buried in the chain of command, the school system may be losing golden opportunities to explain its programs to the community.

Building-Level Communications Links

Many school principals appoint individuals in their buildings to serve as a communications liaison, whose duties might include:

- Becoming a key link in the district's communications network.
- Identifying possible news stories.
- Reporting news tips to both the district's publications editor and the news media.
- Becoming a source of information when reporters have questions about the school.

In some cases, the school will pay this person a bonus, just as it does people who take on extra work leading certain activities.

9. Remember, Humans Err.

Educators occasionally make mistakes. So do reporters. If an error appears in a story, resist the temptation to explode. The reporter may simply have misunderstood something you said.

The best approach is to mention the error courteously to the reporter. Explain what is not correct and don't "demand a correction or retraction." Merely say you know the reporter won't want the error to appear in future stories.

Keep in mind that good reporters also base their livelihoods on their credibility. If they lose this, they too are out of business. A reporter who has made an error will likely sincerely apologize, explain how it occurred, and perhaps even offer a correction.

Only if you get no satisfaction from the reporter, or if the reporter disagrees that an error has occurred, should you consider taking your complaint to the editor or news director.

At times, you may feel a reporter has changed the focus of the story or presented your words in a different context. This happens because no matter how objective reporters try to be, their own views are interacting with yours. Unless an obvious error has been made, try to let these more subtle errors pass.

10. Return calls promptly.

When reporters call, chances are they are working on a story for the next newspaper or newscast. Often, they must complete their stories within one or two days.

Move a reporter's message to the top of your stack. If you don't have sufficient information to answer the questions adequately, ask about the reporter's deadline.

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Then, offer to get the information and call back before that time. That extra effort will be appreciated and remembered.

11. Know what "off-the-record" means.

Always assume that any conversation with a reporter is on-the-record and might be published. Reporters work on that assumption. So should you.

Remember that informal exchanges before or after an interview—jokes you tell as an icebreaker, anecdotes you share about colleagues—could be embarrassing if you read them in the next day's paper. As an educator, the public expects you to care passionately about the education of every child. Even if you've had a particularly trying experience, never write a student off with your words.

If you want to share unquotable information or background with a reporter, ask the reporter if you can go "off-the-record" for a minute. If the reporter agrees, and in most cases he or she will, you can speak without worry of being quoted.

Always be clear, however, about when the off-the-record portion of the conversation ends. Say something direct, such as "Now, we're on-the-record again." Many media relationships have dissolved over disputes about what was uttered off-the-record.

Also be aware that any information you provide off-the-record could be obtained by the reporter from another on-the-record source. If the reporter uses the information from another source, your confidence has not been violated.

Some educators carry with them a brief list of "six things I can say with pride about our schools," such as "We have over 200 volunteers in our school system," or "Nearly 80 percent of our students go on to higher education." This list of what's working in your school system comes in handy when you're asked to make impromptu comments.

12. Think before you speak.

As a reporter asks a question, decide on the information you wish to convey in your reply. Think about phrasing that will help people understand. Try to select those words that will most precisely carry your ideas. If necessary, pause for a few seconds to form your answer.

Again, if you know the subject of the interview, you might want to have two, three, or four points you want to get across to explain an issue or program. Always speak to those who may not have enough information to understand, and do so in clear, plain language.

13. Remember that "I don't know" is not a guilty plea.

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't try to make up something that could be inaccurate.

You simply can't know everything. If you admit you don't know, the reporter will respect your candor and be more inclined to believe you when you do know.

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However, if you don't have the answer, offer to find out and get back to the reporter with it. In some cases, you might offer the reporter the name and phone number of a person who has the information. If the answer is crucial to the remainder of the interview, excuse yourself and call someone who knows, provided there's time. The reporter will be gratified by your extra effort.

14. Remember that "No Comment" is a comment.

In cops and robbers movies of the 1930s, slick people sashayed past bedraggled reporters shouting, "No comment."

In reality, these two words imply that the speaker has something to hide or is being condescending. Most reporters will assume both are true.

Not all questions can be answered. However, other more courteous alternatives don't automatically spark hostile reactions. Simply say you can't answer the question and why. Here are examples:

- "I can't discuss that issue right now because it's the subject of a lawsuit."
- "That's a personal issue involving a school employee, and I don't think a public statement would be appropriate."
- "I'm not going to release the names of the students injured in the school bus accident until their parents have been notified. I am happy to tell you that the hospital has said none of the injuries is serious, however."

15. Be fair to all media.

You can go a long way toward building and maintaining credibility by adopting a policy of scrupulous fairness.

- Distribute even the most routine news releases at the same time to all media outlets. Avoid the temptation to mail the release to some and hand-deliver it to others.
- Don't deliberately time your news releases, even inadvertently, to give one news organization an advantage. A release for morning papers should not be planned to deliberately avoid the previous evening's newscasts.
- If you invite one news organization to cover an event, such as a news conference or other school event, invite them all. An exception is when a reporter has initiated news coverage of a program or event for which no specific media contacts had been planned.
- If you expect both broadcast and print coverage at an event or news conference, allow adequate space. Print reporters are easily frustrated when required to lean around video cameras to ask questions. Television crews often are offended when other reporters walk in front of their cameras and obstruct their line of sight.

16. Look for news pegs.

Know what aspect of a potential story will grab the reader's attention. This is called the "news peg." Generally, some aspect of every story makes it topical

or tie it to a community or worldwide concern. For example, a science class may be launching rockets on the very day a space shuttle is scheduled to lift off.

One way to determine various media and reporters' interest in certain types of stories is to simply read, watch, and listen. In other words, familiarize yourself with a newspaper or newscast's reporting styles, interests, and policies.

Schools are in an excellent position to work with various reporters on many beats—the entertainment reporter (school musical, dances, student art shows), business reporter (economics class), environmental reporter (science projects), and others might find special interest in various school activities. However, if a newsroom has assigned a specific person to cover education, make this reporter your first contact.

How Would You Respond?

A reporter working on a Sunday feature, complete with photos, on your district's high school science program calls for help. Which of these responses would help lay the foundation for effective media relations?

- "Thank you for your interest. This is a great program! Let me pull together some stories we've written on it. In the meantime, if you want to think about how you'd like to approach the story, I'll call the high school and set up a time when you can sit in on a class and visit with the teachers. The department head is out of town, but I'll try to have her call you from the conference. By the way, a lot of other school systems have expressed interest in how we're teaching science."
- "Sorry, the department head is out of town at a conference. I've heard something about the program, but I'd prefer we wait until she's back in town. I think we should wait on this. I wouldn't want us to say something she wouldn't approve of."

17. Be sensitive of deadlines.

Reporters are busiest each day during the two hours immediately preceding their deadlines. That's not generally a good time to call and chat unless you have information they need to complete a story.

Morning newspapers often have early deadlines of 6 or 7 p.m., followed by a final deadline around 11 p.m. Evening papers have deadlines in the late morning, usually shortly before noon. Television and radio stations vary. Some radio stations are now "all news," for example, meaning deadlines are constructed to fit when the station wants to get the story on the air.

Some school districts volunteer to drop off material from various meetings, including tapes, if reporters are too busy to attend. After school board meetings,

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communications administrators will often call radio stations to record a brief summary of what happened for use on newscasts. When this approach is used, all newsworthy portions of the meeting must be covered, even controversial topics. These calls can help reporters with their coverage of events and help them meet deadlines.

18. Set up a good internal reporting system.

Many school systems distribute reporting forms to staff that invite them to submit possible story ideas, often to the district's communications director or directly to the media. Because educators are doing interesting things all the time, they sometimes don't perceive their activities as news.

It's also a good idea to appoint a person in each school building to spot potential news stories. On a "slow news day," a reporter or editor might be grateful for a list of possible features, hard news, or photo opportunities. Every school district will benefit from helping staff develop a "nose for news."

19. Never ask a reporter to show you a story before it is published.

While many reporters call to check facts, a news source should never ask to see a story before it is published. The news media are free and independent, and this type of review would likely be seen as an attempt to cleanse or censor a story before it is published or aired.

Before an interview, have a colleague conduct a mock interview, asking you questions that a reporter might pose, and then critique your responses. If possible, you might want to record this practice session.

If You're Being Interviewed...

One-on-one interviews with reporters are a staple of news media relations. Here are suggestions to help make these interviews productive.

- AGAIN, RULE NO. 1...Be sure what you say is true.
- Anticipate questions.

Generally, you'll know the subject of the interview in advance. Well-informed educators should have little difficulty anticipating, at least in general terms, many of the questions they might be asked.

- Formulate responses.

Think through the points you'd like to make in response to various anticipated questions. Consider what people in the community need to know to understand the issue or program.

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In some cases, you may want to rehearse the interview. Your communications administrator or other colleague might pose probing questions. Those involved should not be reluctant to express their points of view on how the response could be improved, what points were missing, and whether the message was delivered clearly. This type of rehearsal is a way to ensure that you are saying clearly what you want to communicate.

During the actual interview, however, it is important that all responses be spontaneous. Don't try to memorize, read, or recite your answers verbatim.

Making Your Words Sing

Often it's not what you say, but how you say it that grabs the audience's attention. To ensure your words are reported, try these tips:

- Avoid bland or vague words like "interesting," "good," "difficult," and "satisfactory."
- Use similes and metaphors to describe people, events, and actions.
- Use lively action words.
- Avoid quoting someone else. The reporter might not hear, "As Wordsworth once said," and attribute the words to you. Then you look like a plagiarist!
- Describe your feelings.
- Use specific examples. As an educator, you have many heart-warming or tragic stories at your fingertips. People will respond to stories of individuals more than a litany of facts and statistics.

These hypothetical "before" and "after" responses illustrate some of the above points.

Reporter: Tell me a little bit about your new program for gifted, poor students.

Response #1: "We've had interesting results. More than one-third of the students involved seem to be doing better in school overall, and our dropout rate is decreasing. It's worth the money. As the president of Harvard once said, 'If you think education is expensive, try ignorance!' "

Response #2: "This program has given me a new reason to get up in the morning. I come in the classroom and see these children grinning, laughing, chattering. Take Kerry Morris. She's from a single-parent family. Last year, she and her mother lived in a car for two weeks. She used to sit in the back of the classroom twisting her hair. Today after science class she told me she wants to be a biotechnician when she grows up. Every dime we spend on these kids saves us a fortune later in the high cost of human suffering."

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• Remember the reporter's first name.

Reporters hope you consider a conversation with them significant enough to know who they are.

Using a reporter's first name as you answer a question tells him or her that you care. Preface an answer or two with the words, "Well, Andrea, I think..." or even "No, Frank, I'm not sure I agree with that."

• Welcome the recorder.

Of course, live interviews on television or radio are just that, live. When broadcasters come to your school, office, or even your home for an interview, they inevitably will record it.

Today, many print reporters also are using recorders to supplement the arduous task of notetaking during an interview. If a professional reporter asks permission to turn on the tape recorder as the interview begins, it's a good idea to say yes.

The recorder has another benefit. It can protect both you and the reporter against any errors in reporting your comments.

If you feel it's necessary, you also may record the interview. Most reporters will not object. If you eventually feel you were misquoted or quoted out of context to make a point you didn't intend, you can check your actual remarks before you raise the issue.

• Control the interview.

Naturally, you should respond openly and honestly to questions that are asked. However, you don't need to allow the reporter to steer you into directly responding to an unanticipated question for which you have no answer.

If this occurs, rather than saying "no comment," use a transitional phrase to steer back to a related point you've already made, such as, "You may be right, Maria. I'm not exactly sure. But at this point in our progress, I think it's important that we focus on..."

If you're interrupted, use a transition such as, "I'd like to go back to your previous question."

• Offer documents and other background materials.

Charts, graphs, books, reports, memos, letters, and contracts that support your message are valuable aids to a reporter working on a story. With these documents, a reporter's sources expand to include people quoted in a book, a professor who conducted a study, and others.

Media relations professionals often anticipate a reporter's questions and make copies of publications and other documents that provide background information or shed light on complex issues.

These types of materials, however, should not be used in place of personal interviews and conversations. Reporters like to get "live quotes" for their stories. Also, be careful not to deluge a reporter with documents on other important—but unrelated—issues.

Should We Let Them In?

In an effort to provide accurate, engaging coverage, reporters often want to bring photographers and film crews into classrooms.

Schools should try to accommodate these requests. However, educators might be reluctant to allow reporters and photographers random access to the schools if they think doing so will be particularly disruptive, if there is concern that doing so might inflame an already volatile situation, if an incident has taken place that could bring physical harm to reporters, or if there is special concern about invading the privacy of certain students. For example, school systems often require signed releases when using photos of special education students.

However, districts can establish reasonable ground rules to address these concerns. Good relations are fostered when schools are flexible enough to allow reporters access when needed.

Essential access. Karen Layton, an education specialist for KCNC-TV in Denver, Colorado, tells how one school district's willingness to let her bring cameras, lights, and microphones into the classroom resulted in more balanced media coverage of a sensitive story:

> A parent called me to complain his fifth-grade son was getting beaten up in school, and the principal wasn't doing enough about it.
>
> I contacted the principal who gave me permission to interview her. She admitted she was very nervous to be in front of the camera, but wanted to explain her point of view. She acknowledged the parent was right in feeling concerned about the safety of his child, but because of the transient neighborhood, many children came from homes where aggressive behavior is acceptable.
>
> She took my photographer and me into a classroom and showed us how the curriculum included lessons to instill a positive self-image in these youngsters. Her teachers had gone so far as to create billboards in the hallways with positive behavior messages on them.
>
> We aired both sides and later got calls from the complaining parent who now recognized the wider scope of the problem, and promised to work more closely with the principal to resolve the conflict.
>
> The principal could have said, "No comment," and prevented us from going inside the classroom. We still would have run the story, but her side would not have been adequately told.

Source: *The School Administrator*, August 1990

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Tips for TV Interviews

Every day, thousands of Americans appear on television interviews. If you're available, never turn down an opportunity to be interviewed since it is an opportunity to present the school system's perspective.

The following tips can help you communicate during a live or recorded interview.

Before the interview...

Do:
- Anticipate questions; prepare answers.
- Dress as you would for a day in the office.
- Consider any microphone ON.

Don't:
- Assume you can answer all questions extemporaneously; you'll be surprised.
- Overdress; you'll call more attention to yourself than your message.

During the interview...

Do:
- Look at the interviewer while responding.
- Use the reporter's first name.
- Ignore the several people who may be walking around off the set.

Don't:
- Look at the camera while responding.
- Fidget, cross legs, fold arms, rub brow.

After the interview...

Do:
- Stay where you are until you are told that you are off the air.
- Thank the interviewer and crew for making the interview possible.

Don't:
- Stride off the set immediately—the crew may need some final shots.
- Overlook common courtesy.

If you're using charts or other audiovisuals during a television interview, remember to check them out ahead of time with the show's producer or host.

- **Don't be defensive.**

When a person becomes immediately defensive, people often interpret this attitude as a sign of guilt, arrogance, or discomfort in being confronted with an issue, accusation, or fact.

Strive to address each question you're asked rationally and sensitively. If an accusation is made about the schools, don't repeat it; just provide a straight answer.

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- **Be aware of your nonverbal communication.**

Rubbing your nose, loosening your collar, and other nervous habits will signal that you may be unsure of yourself, not telling the truth, or getting uncomfortable. Crossing your arms and legs as you respond to a question will signal that you're concealing something. Also, avoid the temptation to rock side to side or back and forth in your chair.

On the other hand, smile or laugh if the subject warrants it.

Reporters who spot nonverbal signals may press harder to see what's behind the defenses. Of course, on television, thousands will read those signals and draw their own conclusions.

- **Talk to the reporter, not the camera.**

When sitting or standing for a television interview, don't directly address the camera. Talk directly to the reporter and think of the camera as simply a third party in the conversation.

Viewers know they're watching an interview, not a speech. They hear the reporter ask the question. They want to see you respond to the reporter, not to them.

Unless you're hosting a program, looking directly at the camera will create the impression that you consider the interviewer secondary to your message. It can create viewer sympathy for the interviewer and antagonism toward you.

- **Dress appropriately.**

As with any public appearance, the dress code for an interview is: don't wear clothing or other accessories that will detract from what you have to say.

Consider how you want to be seen and how you want people to think of you, then choose apparel that reinforces what you want.

For a television interview, stark contrasts of black and white or severe plaids can create strange problems on the screen, such as a fuzzy, wavy pattern. Heavy jewelry can reflect light or make distracting clinking sounds.

- **Suggest questions.**

Reporters appreciate hints about what you'd like people to understand and will often form questions that will allow you to share this information.

During a live interview on radio or television, a commercial break can be a good time to suggest a possible line of questioning to the interviewer.

- **When appropriate, let others know what you said.**

If you've responded to an unusual question during an interview and feel others might be asked the same thing, let key people know what you said. Doing so may prompt discussion of the issue or make it possible for others to provide consistent answers.

Tools of the Trade

A variety of tools exist to take your message to the media and, through them, to your community and beyond:

- The phone call.

It's easy and direct. Simply call a reporter, or a small group of reporters, to alert them to a potential story. Increasing numbers of reporters now have voice mail to guarantee that your message will be received. However, because reporters often are out covering stories, it does not guarantee when they'll receive your message.

The phone call is best for communicating a particular story with one media outlet that might be interested. If your goal is to inform all media simultaneously, it's often best to do it in writing.

- The news release.

The workhorse of media relations, this is the vehicle most used to distribute information to great numbers of reporters and editors at the same time.

A news release or press release can be used to call attention to upcoming events, report on past events, summarize test scores or results of a study, or describe ongoing programs. Its length varies from one page to several pages.

Regardless of its purpose, a news release should:

— Be written in journalistic style, including the five Ws (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) in the first three paragraphs. It uses adjectives sparingly, communicating mainly through nouns and verbs. Complex numbers and figures are generally rounded off ($1,431,222.43 becomes $1.43 million).

— Attribute any opinions to individuals as direct quotes.

— Generally, follow Associated Press style guidelines—the style most newspapers use. Identify anyone mentioned by name with his or her full name and title on first reference. An organization is identified by its full name on first reference. Abbreviations, acronyms, and last names are used in subsequent references.

— Include the full name and address of the organization sending the release, along with the name, title, and phone number of a media contact who can provide further information.

Some newspapers, usually in smaller communities with limited staffs, may use news releases verbatim. If necessary, the editor will likely cut material from the

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bottom of a release. Therefore, it is wise to arrange information in descending order of importance, in what journalists call the "inverted pyramid" style.

Reporters will usually scan and discard many releases because of space limitations, competing stories, or the fact that the release contains interesting information but not news.

A starting point. Most reporters will treat the release as an information source or tip, then follow up with a phone call or interview if they are interested. In some cases, the release is paraphrased into a short item.

Unless you've scheduled a news conference and are reminding reporters of the time and place, resist the temptation to call and ask, "Did you get the release?" or "Can I tell you anything else about it?" Let the reporter decide whether he or she wants to know more.

News releases should always be mailed first class. Unsolicited releases distributed by fax stand the chance of being buried in everyone else's "fax mail." However, faxing releases to news organizations can be an efficient way to communicate late-breaking, important news. Examples include an emergency school board meeting or a news conference on recently enacted education legislation.

A brief, faxed news release that summarizes essential information is a welcome aid to most reporters.

(See Sample News Release....Page 29.)

- **The media advisory.**

This one-page sheet alerts the media of the essential facts of an upcoming event (the five Ws). The advisory, as with the news release, contains the name and address of the organization and the name, title, and phone number of a person who can provide more information.

Unlike a news release, a media advisory is not necessarily written in complete sentences. Its style is often similar to an announcement or invitation. For a reporter, an advisory's advantage over a news release is that the facts are quickly apparent, uncluttered by other verbiage. Because they are straightforward and brief, advisories also are easier to prepare than news releases.

(See Sample Media Advisory....Page 30.)

- **The fact sheet.**

As the name suggests, this tool is a one-page sheet summarizing the facts of an event, program, or report. When sent with a news release, a fact sheet offers reporters a quick digest of news contained in the longer release.

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For people unaccustomed to writing in journalistic style, the fact sheet is a handy tool. All the writer needs to do is summarize facts and necessary information in bulleted lists or short sentences. The reporters take it from there.

Fact sheets also must include basic information such as the name and address of the organization and the name, title, and phone number of a person who can provide further information.

(See Sample Fact Sheet....Page 31.)

The Media Kit

The tools of media relations—news releases, brochures, news articles, and fact sheets about schools and programs—come together in the media kit. You also may want to include biographies and photos of frequently quoted administrators and board members.

Neatly packaged in a folder, a media kit compiles related information about a single event or provides general information about a school, school system, or educational program.

Many school systems prepare media kits annually and distribute them to media as a reference tool.

- **The news conference.**

Although it should be used sparingly, the news conference is a time-honored device that fills at least three basic media relations needs:

— Your need to communicate to all media outlets simultaneously about an urgent issue or news item.

— The media's need to talk with you about breaking news.

— The need to provide all media access to a knowledgeable source who will be available for a limited time.

Here's an example: A fight among several students occurs during an evening sports event. Rumors are spreading rapidly about who started the fight, how many students were injured, and what the administration's response was. As soon as facts can be gathered, the district calls a news conference to answer the media's questions on behalf of the public and to quell rumors with facts.

Keep it simple. Often, school systems don't want to leave anyone out, so they line up five or six people to speak at a news conference. By the time each person has made a statement, the time for reporters' questions is diminished. Keep the number of presenters at a news conference to a minimum and make opening statements as clear and brief as possible. Leave plenty of time for reporters' questions.

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Technically, a news conference should take place in front of an appropriate background, such as a school building. Background signs should not make the news conference look like the set of a television commercial. All participants should speak directly into a microphone. If possible, a "mult box"—a box reporters can plug into to record from the room's public address system—should be available, especially if the conference or event is held in a large facility.

If appropriate, a news conference might include people at other sites through satellite or other forms of electronic communication. Two-way sound might be made available through speakerphone. Closer to home, some news conferences might be held in a school to give reporters a firsthand view of a program in action.

The cardinal rule. Never hold a news conference unless it is newsworthy. This may sound obvious, but reporters have become wary of news conferences staged by various companies to promote commercial products. A news conference should be held only if there is sufficient media interest in the issue to ensure respectable attendance and if the purpose of the news conference can't be accomplished through a news release.

- **Individual briefings.**

In some cases, a news conference may not seem appropriate. However, some reporters still need an opportunity to ask questions about a program or issue. That's when school systems might want to offer reporters individual briefings with appropriate sources.

Individual briefings solve the problem of reporters who have many questions, but limited time to ask them during a news conference. However, organizing and conducting these briefings can be time consuming for local school officials.

- **The op-ed piece.**

Just about every daily or weekly newspaper devotes a page to opinions expressed by people outside its organization. Traditionally, this page is opposite the editorial page; thus, the abbreviated name, Op-Ed.

Most Op-Ed space customarily is filled by national syndicated columnists. However, local contributions generally are welcome. Editors often seek comments on issues of current interest.

The Op-Ed page is an ideal forum for expressing a school district's position. In some cases, an opposing position will appear in another piece on the same page. Even issues not currently in the news, such as the need for more parent involvement in schools, could be acceptable as Op-Ed topics.

An editor of the local paper, perhaps the Op-Ed editor, will give you the requirements for these pieces, which generally run from 600 to 800 words.

- **Visits with the editorial board.**

In some cases, school district officials may wish to meet with the editor of the editorial page or the editorial board of a newspaper or broadcast outlet. The purpose of the visit is to provide facts about an issue, such as an upcoming finance election, and to ask for editorial support.

- **Letters to the Editor.**

A newspaper's letters column, usually part of the editorial page, is a forum for readers' opinions. Take advantage of this forum to express positions, ideas, or facts in your own words.

Letters usually are accepted on any topic, newsworthy or not, within the bounds of good taste and available space. Most newspapers, however, reserve the right to condense letters to fit the allotted space and restrict writers to something like one published letter a month.

Groups working to impose certain beliefs on schools, such as the religious right, often include letters to the editor in their campaigns. Schools, parent groups, and others who understand school issues from the inside also need to write these types of letters to provide the public with a balanced opinion.

- **Public service announcements.**

Commonly known as a PSA, these announcements use free air time offered by radio and television stations.

As the name implies, PSAs are expected to provide a public service, not debate a controversy. They usually are aired during available time when few commercials have been sold.

A 30- or 60-second PSA on local radio stations could be used to advise the community of a program or service offered by the schools or to build support and understanding for a school program or service. Station managers and program or public service directors can advise you on their PSA requirements.

Remember, PSAs are heard, not read. Write in short, conversational sentences. Long flowery passages, while good reading, are difficult to use effectively on the air.

For example, instead of starting a PSA with a sentence like "The district is currently accepting applications for this year's summer school session," try using a direct, catchy statement like "Now is the time to enroll your children in summer school."

- **Appearances on radio and television programs.**

Many radio and television stations host interview programs that include live or taped guests. If possible, schools and school systems should provide guests for these programs, which offer an outstanding opportunity to feature students, teachers, administrators, parents, and others.

Protocol and the Electronic Age

"Why didn't I know about this story? You should always tell the board and staff first when the media wants to cover something in the schools."

How many times have you heard this from a board or staff member?

Instant electronic communication has made it increasingly difficult to give these groups advance notice of every story or television interview. For example, many school board meetings are now carried live on cable television. The next day's board report, while vital, can't possibly beat the electronic swiftness of live coverage.

If you've done an interview or had other contact with the media, make an effort to let other school officials know. But also explain to your board and staff that the first objective in media relations is getting reporters the information they need as quickly and accurately as possible. Explain how, occasionally, news may get out to the public before other educators hear about it.

Inexperienced board members and educators can become envious when they see others quoted. But one sure way to kill good media relations is to insist that certain people have their names in the paper. Reporters are concerned with getting the right facts from the right source, not with office politics.

In today's electronic era, when reporters need information, they need it now. Those who hesitate generally lose a valuable opportunity to communicate their message to a large audience.

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Conclusion

Any organization that expects fair, balanced, accurate, and interesting coverage by the media must be fair, balanced, accurate, and interesting in working with the media.

Help reporters cover the news, and they'll help you by informing the community about the important work of schools.

Both schools and the news media need to understand that occasional conflict is a fact of life. Mutually productive relationships should be sound enough to weather the storms of controversy.

As an educator working to maintain the public's good will toward schools, the most constructive attitude you can convey is that you're pleased reporters find what is happening in your school interesting and newsworthy. And never forget rule number one: always tell the truth!

Appendices

Media Jargon

Newspaper Terms

BEAT: A reporter's area of responsibility.

BRIEF: A very short story.

BULLET: A graphical device used to identify items in a list.

CUT: To reduce the size of a story to fit the allotted space. A task performed by an editor.

COLUMN INCH: The standard unit of measurement for newspaper stories. The column inch is one column wide, one inch deep.

DUMMY: A small-scale design of a newspaper page showing positions of stories, photos, ads, and headlines.

EAR: A box in an upper corner of the front page, usually used for promotional purposes.

EDITOR: Title given to people who assign stories, edit stories, design pages, write headlines, conceive ideas, or have any degree of managerial responsibility. An adjective in the title (managing editor, copy editor) designates the person's role.

GRAF: Abbreviation for paragraph, as in: "I can only write three grafs on this."

HEAD: A headline. Usually written by a copy editor.

LEAD: The first paragraph of a story.

NOTCH: An indentation in a story usually used for a small photo.

ONE-A: The front page. Page 1 of the A Section.

OP-ED: The page opposite the editorial page, usually reserved for opinion.

PLAY: The position of a story in the newspaper.

SHOOT: (verb) Taking a photograph; (noun) An event at which a photograph is taken.

SIDEBAR: A smaller, related story accompanying a larger story. Sidebars usually are boxed or set off graphically to distinguish them from the main story.

TRIM: Synonym for cut.

TV-Radio Terms

ACTUALITY: The portion of a news report in which the reporter is not talking, or original sound or pictures from the scene.

BITE: A brief excerpt of someone's recorded words. Short for sound bite.

CUE: A signal to start talking.

CRAWL: Words moving across a TV screen, usually at the bottom, sometimes from bottom to top. Often used as weather warnings or to advise viewers of program delays.

FOOTAGE: Film or videotape on which pictures have been recorded.

GREEN ROOM: Any room, regardless of color, in which studio guests are asked to wait until they go on the air.

LEDE: The first story in a newscast.

MULTBOX: A box into which more than one person can plug equipment to record a room's sound system. Often, used by TV crews covering press conferences. (Also: Mult)

PLAY: The position of a story in a newscast.

REMOTE: A news report originating outside the studio.

SOUND BITE: Synonym for bite.

SOUNDPERSON: Member of a TV camera crew responsible for the audio portion of the report.

STAND-UP: The act of a reporter talking into a camera from a remote location, often used to summarize a just-seen event, as in: "I'll do a stand-up when this press conference ends."

VOICE LEVEL: Testing the volume of a studio guest's voice so the broadcast equipment can be adjusted to handle it.

VOICE OVER: The voice of an unseen reporter or announcer discussing the pictures on the TV screen.

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NEWS RELEASE

Monday, May 17, 1993

98% Pass Writing Test, As All
School and Student Groups Reach
Passing Rates of 96% or Better

Students in the Montgomery County Public Schools achieved the highest ever passing rate of 98 percent on the Maryland Writing Test this year, propelling all high schools and student racial or ethnic groups systemwide to passing rates of at or above 96 percent.

Students in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program marked the biggest gain, with an increase of 13 percentage points to 88 percent, an impressive improvement on a test that demands significant English language skills.

The new passing rate of 98 percent systemwide, a two-percentage point gain over last year, marks a 33-percentage point gain since the test was first given in 1983. The improved achievement among African American and Hispanic students nearly eliminates the gap with white students systemwide.

White students passed at the highest rate of 99 percent, followed by Asian American students at 98 percent, African American students at 97 percent and Hispanic students at 96 percent. All high schools had passing rates of 96 percent or higher.

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Thursday, April 22, 1993

MEDIA ADVISORY
for Sunday, April 25, 1993

What: **Rosa Parks To Participate in Dedication of Middle School Named in Her Honor in Olney**

Abstract

The dedication of Rosa Parks Middle School will feature the participation of Mrs. Rosa Parks and remarks about her historical involvement in the civil rights events of the last 40 years.

Mrs. Parks will be available for a group press interview following the dedication.

When: Sunday, April 25, 1993, beginning at 3:00 p.m.
(Open house and book signing begins at 2:00 p.m.)

Where: Rosa Parks Middle School
19200 Olney Mill Road, Olney, Maryland

Contact: Sarah Pinkney-Murkey, Principal
Rosa Parks Middle School
(301) 924-3180

Brian J. Porter, Director
Department of Information
Telephone: (301) 279-3391 or 279-3853

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FACT SHEET

The Dallas Independent School District is the eighth largest school district in the nation. It encompasses an area of 351 square miles in the east portion of the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex and includes all or portions of the municipalities of Dallas, Seagoville, Farmers Branch, Addison, Mesquite, Balch Springs, Garland, Cockrell Hill, Carrollton, University Park, and Highland Park.

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS

Elementary Schools	
Pre-K Center	1
PKK-3 Centers	19
4-6 Centers	8
K-8 Center	1
PKK-6 Centers	105
PKK-5 Centers	3
Secondary Schools	
Special Education Centers	1
Middle Schools (Grades 7-8)	24
High Schools (Grades 9-12)	20
Magnet High Schools	7
Alternative Schools/Programs	8
Total Schools	**197**

STUDENTS

Enrollment	
Elementary School	87,396
Middle School	20,173
High School	32,250
Total	**139,819**
Ethnic Composition	
African American	62,825 (44.9%)
Hispanic	53,348 (38.2%)
White	20,659 (14.8%)
Asian	2,408 (1.7%)
American Indian	579 (0.4%)
Graduates	
College-bound	64.5%
Bound for Military Training	5.2%
Allocation Formula of Teachers by Grade	
Pre-Kindergarten	1:44*
Kindergarten-Fourth	1:22
K- Chapter 1 Schools	1:18
4-6-South/West Learning Centers	1:18
7-8-South/West Learning Centers	1:18
5-6	1:27
Middle (grades 7-8)	1:27.5
High School (grades 9-12)	1:25

* Pre-K is a half-day program serving 22 students per session

BUDGET

Total Budget for 1992-93	**$676,931,617**
Operations	$544,366,711
Extra District (Federal)	$44,676,896
Food Service	$36,364,043
Fund Reserves	$8,832,396
Total Operations Budget	**$636,240,048**
Debt Service	$37,785,569
School Construction	$2,906,000
Total Non-Operations Budget	**$40,691,569**
Income Sources	
Local & CED Taxes	$535,794,780 (79.37%)
Extra District (Federal)	$45,697,365 (6.77%)
State Funds	$41,600,027 (6.16%)
Food Service	$38,364,043 (5.68%)
Other Sources	$10,285,506 (1.52%)
State Funds for Technology	$3,304,363 (0.50%)
Total Income	**$675,046,084 (100%)**
Expenses	
Instruction and Related Services	$470,368,230 (69.48%)
Building Maintenance	$74,030,222 (10.94%)
Pupil Services	$73,617,063 (10.88%)
Interest/Sinking	$37,785,569 (5.58%)
Administration	$18,224,533 (2.69%)
School Construction	$2,906,000 (0.43%)
Total Expenses	**$676,931,617 (100%)**
Tax Rate	
Dallas ISD	$0.43087 Per $100 Value
County Education District	$0.9576 Per $100 Value
Available Exemptions	
Homestead—State, $5,000; Local, 10%	
Over 65—State, $15,000; Local $35,000+10%	
Disable—$3,000 maximum	
Budgeted Operations Cost Per Student	$4,550
Assessed Valuation	
Real Estate	$27,433,139,335
Business Personal	$9,184,581,010
Assessed Value/Student	$261,886
Current Bonded Indebtedness as of 8/31/92	$169,091,000
Percent of Debt to Assessed Valuation	0.46%

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Acknowledgments

orking with the News Media was written by Pat Ordovensky and Gary Marx. Ordovensky, often called the "dean of education reporters," served for many years as education writer for *USA Today* and Gannett News Service. He also has worked as a local education reporter. During his career, Ordovensky directed *USA Today*'s "All USA Academic Team" program, which honors high achieving students in the nation's schools.

Marx, AASA senior associate executive director in charge of communications, spent 15 years working in the media prior to becoming a school administrator. He has been executive director of communications for two school systems, has taught communications courses at several universities, written books and articles on the topic, and has done presentations in the United States and Canada, as well as in Europe and Asia.

Leslie Eckard, AASA publications manager, and Katie Ross, communications assistant, edited the manuscript and supervised its production. Graphic design was provided by Dahlman/Middour Design of McLean, Virginia.

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American Association of School Administrators